

Brian De Palma Is The Most Important Filmmaker Of His Generation; Or, A Soft, Brief Thesis On The Ending Of 'Blow Out'

by Chris Okum



Blow Out is Brian De Palma's masterpiece and the ending is one of the greats in modern American movies, with sound technician Jack Terry finally finding the right scream for the grindhouse horror movie he's working on, courtesy of Sally, the murdered prostitute he had wired and was following, but could not save. It might just be the

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most downbeat ending of any movie made during the New Hollywood era, which was chock full of downbeat endings. But why does it seem so much more downbeat than all the rest? This is a question that's been bothering me since I first started watching *Blow Out* at least once a year over the the last decade. The movie is a masterclass in editing, sound design, framing, etc. All of this is fairly obvious to anyone who loves movies. But that ending. There's just something about it that I couldn't quite articulate. And then it came to me while I was trying to fall asleep to Chrome's 1977 album *Alien Soundtracks*, which, admittedly, seems like a counter-intuitive album to try and fall asleep to. But there it was, I thought to myself. According to film historians, the New Hollywood era began with either *The Graduate* or *Bonnie and Clyde*, and ended with either *Jaws*, *Star Wars*, or *Heaven's Gate*, the latter of which seems to be the de facto winner in the contest to see who's the loser who ruined it all. But I don't know. I think *Blow Out* is the final movie of the New Hollywood era, and I think it's finality is more appropriate to the narrative we have given the New Hollywood era, which is that it was time when American movies were more apt to look realistically at society, with characters who sensed that something was not quite right with the American Dream. characters who were willing to fight the system, but only after figuring out that system was woefully corrupt and that there was no line of escape, hence all of the depressing conclusions. Think Jake Gittes at the end of *Chinatown*, or Joe Frady at the end of *The Parallax View*, or Harry Caul at the end of *The Conversation*. They've all figured out what the problem is and who is responsible for it, but they have also figured out that they are helpless to make a dent in the endless cycles of corruption. Fair enough, right? All of these movies, one after another, each taking their turn diagnosing the culture, only to discover how ineffectual the individual is at making any sort of change. And then, in 1981, comes De Palma's *Blow Out*, which looks at the entire oeuvre of New Hollywood and says, "You were all being way too optimistic." Because *Blow Out* isn't about a character finding out how helpless he is, it's about how the movies themselves, the

technology, the form, the apparatus, is the one that's helpless. It's the medium itself which is feckless. Jack Terry edits, records sound, and even makes a clever little movie himself, all to find out what happened to an assassinated Senator, and not only does he not find out why it happened, he doesn't even know who did it. He is no closer to figuring out the conspiracy at the end of movie than he was at the beginning, which totally goes against the tropes of every single paranoid thriller made during the time of Vietnam and Watergate. With *Blow Out*, De Palma is saying that even if you have mastered the technology it will not help you find out the truth. He's saying that movies themselves are ineffectual at making any type of change. He's saying that it's pointless to try and take down the monolithic and the demonic, that it simply can't be done, not with celluloid, anyway. He's saying that at best, all a movie can do is help generate more movies. De Palma was by far the most politically subversive of his generational cohort, with the movies he wrote and directed at the beginning of his career (*Greetings* in 1968 and *Hi, Mom!* in 1970) broaching the topics of conspiracy, pornography and black power way before anyone else, so it seems kind of inevitable that he would be the one to laugh at his contemporaries for thinking they could, through the art of cinema, achieve any kind of closure, or affect, or knowledge about how the world works, and by laughing at them, bringing the curtain down on the era of cinematic rejuvenation he played a heavy hand in bringing about. But there it is. De Palma also seems to be saying that there's no point in acting all depressed, or pessimistic, or disillusioned, because those things are for people who think they had a chance to begin with. No, says De Palma, when you find yourself impotent against the relentlessness of unknown forces hellbent on obfuscating the actuality of events there is really only one thing you can do: accept it, close your eyes, plug your ears, and scream.

